

The Fear of Art and the Art of Fear

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Abstract

Prospective teachers often walk into my course, Arts in the Elementary Classroom, carrying a guarded consciousness that constrains unencumbered artistic exploration. My responsibility as their instructor is to question mantras that reflect insecurity in process and make pedagogical use of their fears. Through studying the nature of these fears throughout the course, I find growing awareness of how students' fears can lead to more embodied understandings of what it means to learn and teach with the arts, recovering a more complex process of reflection and a holistic understanding of what it means to be an artist and teacher.

Introduction

I teach an undergraduate level course for prospective teachers concerning arts in the elementary curriculum. Part of my job as an educator is to help students seek out that which blocks or prevents them from greater understanding of themselves and the subject matter. As an instructor of future educators, it is even more imperative to enable the habits of mind that affirm openness to new experience. Dewey (1910) supports this notion: "Education has accordingly not only to safeguard an individual against the besetting erroneous tendencies of his own mind . . . but also to undermine and destroy the accumulated and self-perpetuating prejudices of long ages" (p. 25). I do not presume to have the correct answers to bestow upon my students and move on; however, I do teach with the assumption that new material will be encountered and should be met with a disposition of openness and flexibility. Student fear can inhibit the openness and flexibility I seek. My own fears concerning my preparedness to teach Arts in the Elementary Curriculum, an undergraduate methods course, play a role in enabling me to connect to students and remain aware of what it is like encountering unfamiliar experiences. This paper explores the

pedagogical potential of fear utilizing the work of John Dewey and others seeking to explore the complexity of the educational experience. This journey encompasses what English and Stengel (2010) concluded in their exploration of fear: “By recognizing and naming fearful moments in their students’ (and their own) experiences, educators become aware of the places where growth is needed” (p. 536).

As an artist, I am continually compelled by the power of the creative process and how satisfying it is to use one’s mind and body in harmony to create something that offers unique expression. As a student, I am idealistic in considering the potential for education as I struggle to learn new discourses and embark upon new journeys discovering new concepts and new research and inspiring philosophers and theoreticians. As a teacher, I feel a sense of responsibility for other learners, always holding tremendous hope for each of my students to surpass my own expectations as they encounter new material and new experiences. Each of these roles plays a part in how I view education as a place to engage the senses within the interwoven forms of interaction that take place each day in the classroom. The classroom is a place to pull apart, to flesh out, to reconsider, and to weave together new and old ideas to form significant understandings of the world and meaning within it. Specifically, I seek to explore the potential that fear has within the context of the arts classroom.

Arts in the Elementary Curriculum involves one semester for preservice elementary teachers (usually juniors and seniors), focusing on being exposed to visual arts, music, dance, and theater and encouraging them to consider the importance of the arts to themselves and to the educational experience. This course is unlike my previous teaching experience at the high school level, where students were often learning a specialized form of visual art for a semester (e.g., photography class, pottery class). Arts in the Elementary Curriculum is focused on multiple art forms (visual arts, music, dance, and theater) and how to teach them and to enable aesthetic experiences for students—not a small task for a single semester. My intentions for the course are to provide experiences that enable preservice students to gain a greater sense of what the arts entail and how they are a vital part of learning and teaching. I see this course as an opportunity for students to experiment with different arts experiences that transform and complicate their preconceived notions about the arts. With each new group of students, however, there seem to be recurring fears bubbling to the surface, needing to be attended to.

English and Stengel’s (2010) analysis of fear addresses how Dewey viewed the emotion of fear not as affect, or immediate response, but as something named in reflection on an experience. My students are quick to name and categorize experiences they have not yet had. Unlike Dewey’s prompting to shift the focus to action, these students are giving in to doubt and discomfort, allowing it to halt the experience all together. I see tiresome repetition in the phrases my students hold up as shields against new experiences. They are unique and expressive in-

dividuals giving themselves far too little credit for their own potential growth as artists. Before any presenting of work, or even ideas, students tend to qualify their statements with, “I’m just not that artistic,” or “I’m not a creative person, but . . .” The lack of confidence is overwhelming; it exhibits despair of the self and distrust in new experience. The interesting, and rather disturbing, part is that these mantras or catchphrases seem comfortable taking their place beside each student who utters them. They are not said with sadness, but with acknowledged limitation and a pleading not to be judged by their artwork. They are carried around not as a badge of honor, but as a clause or addendum for anyone wanting them to “step outside the box” and willingly experience discomfort. Here are some representative comments from students regarding their greatest fears about taking this course:

- “I’m not very artsy at all and really freeze when coming up with ideas.”
- “My biggest fear is finding out that there really is no creative side to me.”
- “My greatest fear about this class is presenting work that will not always look good. I know my artistic ability and it needs work.”
- “I am most afraid of other people not liking what my art has to say and the way it says it.”
- “I am most nervous about getting outside my comfort zone.” (student documents, 2009)

I have taught this particular course eight times as a graduate student in teacher education, and at the start of each new course, I am still confronted with students who resist the idea of being an artist and the possibilities present within the arts. English and Stengel (2010) wrote that “the educator’s responsibility is to encourage students to *stay in* that discomfort and doubt associated with new learning, to avoid a premature commitment to fear and the avoidance behaviors that mark fear *as* fear, until interest emerges and learning becomes possible” (p. 530). It is this felt responsibility that leads me to a necessary exploration of how my own teaching of the course has evolved with the knowledge of these fears and how the story of the course plays out in finding pedagogical usefulness in the fears that students bring to it. I examine Dewey’s position on how this fear demands salience in considering the multifaceted experiences that the arts and learning encompass. I wonder what might be possible if these fears were treated as a positive and productive step in the learning process. English and Stengel (2010) agree in saying, “if there is no interruption that arises in our engagement with the new, unfamiliar, and unexpected, there is no educational possibility, no learning, no growth” (p. 531). Perhaps, then, the discomfort, the struggle, and the interruption is necessary and vital to learning. What might be possible if fears of committing to daily artistic practice, being judged, and performing became a way to better understand ourselves as learners, teachers, and artists? What follows is an explanation of how I began to identify my students’ fears and how I continue to work with (not through) those fears within the context of an arts classroom. The reader will hear not only my voice as teacher,

artist, and researcher, but also the voices of students, from their initial fears to their reconstructing of those fears at the end of the course.

Giving Fear a Name: The Story of Fear Cards

After going over the syllabus on the first day of Arts in the Elementary Curriculum, I distribute index cards to each table of students, instructing them to write down their greatest fear about taking this class. “Don’t put your name on it. Be completely honest.” I sit down on a stool at the front of the room and wait. I notice some looking around with worried glances while others immediately begin writing. After everyone finishes and cards are collected, I give them the task of personalizing their table’s art supply basket, already filled with supplies, while I look at the cards and group them by topic. I think it might help to ease the students into using materials and the act of artistic creation, so “decorating” or “personalizing” becomes a transitional activity into creating artwork. I see it as a no-stakes, creative task to get them doing the work of creating. I turn the music on and a gentle buzz of conversation picks up in the room. As I sort the cards, finding many similar concerns, I listen in on students’ conversations as I consider how I will address the class. I smile when one group of girls agrees with one another that this is just what they needed. “I can feel my stress level going down,” and “This is fun” are heard as they color, cut, and design their basket. I wonder, then, why learning can’t always be this cathartic? What is it about the act of creating that allows us that release?

After collecting my thoughts on how I will respond to students’ fears and how much ambiguity might still be present regarding exactly how the semester will unfold, I address the class saying that it seems there are a few things we should talk about together. I affirm their questions, commenting that many of us have similar concerns, and that I will try to be as clear as possible, inviting further questions as they feel more comfortable. Three main ideas begin to emerge from these fear cards: 1) concerns about the sketchbook requirement (daily practice for the course), 2) concerns about being judged on artwork and feeling unable to produce quality work, and 3) embarrassment about singing and dancing (performing) in front of others during the class. A few questions surface from apprehensive students, clarifying the course requirements: How many sketchbook pages per day? What exactly will they have to do? Reserving enough anticipation for the coming semester, I answer their questions, watch them pack up and leave at the end of class, and wonder: Now what? Now that they have shared their fears, what can I do to make this part of a productive, creative semester? First, I have to acknowledge that “to teach is to disrupt another’s taken-for-granted worldview” (Stengel, 2008, p. 73). I have already indicated that I will be challenging what they know to be true about teaching and the arts (and themselves as artists); and that they are right in their resistance to this experience. The next step is to examine closely the three main emerging fears coming from the students of Arts in the Elementary Curriculum.

“I’m not very artsy”: The Fear of Daily Practice

Through habits formed in intercourse with the world, we also in-habit the world. It becomes a home and the home is part of our every experience.

—Dewey, *Art as Experience*

Daily practice for Arts in the Elementary Curriculum involves students working each day (whether class meets or not) in their sketchbook. They are to come up with entries on their own, reflecting not only on course content, but on their daily lives as well through writing, drawing, and other methods. Occasionally, prompts are given in class, but it is expected that students generate their own process for using their sketchbooks. After hearing these expectations for daily practice in my course, students often respond with fears such as, “I’m not very artsy at all and really freeze when coming up with ideas,” or “My biggest fear is finding out that there really is no creative side to me.” Because daily practice for Arts in the Elementary Curriculum is to take place outside the classroom, students need to find out for themselves through daily interaction with their thoughts and ideas that learning does not exist only in the classroom. Learning, and therefore teaching, are living currents that flow through every moment of our lives, helping us make connections between our selves, others, and the spaces we inhabit. Perhaps daily practice is the first step to helping students make those connections between themselves, the course, and life outside the classroom.

Daily practice is meant to encourage students’ habits of mind involving creativity and regular use of their cognitive and visceral powers in tandem with their bodies (Dewey, 1910; Eisner, 2002). It is through this practice that Dewey (1934) tells us we “in-habit the world.” I feel confident that all my students have something to say about themselves and their experiences, and that perhaps they just need the space to say it. May (1991) calls this lingering: a chance to reflect on how we relate to the world, “and what it means to be in it” (p. 140). I wholeheartedly agree with May, who recognizes that, “human expression connotes more than surface features of elements, and that those who wish to make meaning must be curious, attentive, and active constructors of meaning” (p. 142). Dewey (1934) exemplifies this sentiment in stating that “inner harmony is attained only when, by some means, terms are made with the environment” (p. 17). He further discusses the impossibility of separating mind from body and how learning must take place through a growing awareness of one’s surroundings. Meaning is then constructed through one’s sensibilities and intellect working together. The daily practice required for my class is rooted in these ideas, asking students to return consistently to their sketchbooks to record thoughts, reflections, reactions, and general responses to their everyday experience.

My intentions for daily practice, however, begin to take a different form as students face the blank pages of their sketchbooks. From my mouth to their ears,

“daily practice” goes from unstructured, creative, spontaneous, flowing response, to numbered question-and-answer retorts. I ask them to “respond to an experience” and they ask “how, with how many words, and what do you want to see?” It is as if they think there is a right way to not only respond to an experience, but even to have an experience in the arts. Why don’t they understand what I want them to do? How can I better communicate that daily practice is about valuing individual process, not the product? When the focus is on a final output in most other academic settings, how can I put forth formative thinking as the goal? It seems there is a fear of what Dewey talks about in reference to imagination: “Imagination is not a matter of an impossible subject matter, but a constructive way of dealing with any subject-matter under the influence of a pervading idea” (Dewey, 1915, p. 91). “Where do we come up with ideas?” my students ask. Dewey answers, pinpointing the strength of imagination not in how many absolutely original and fantastical ideas they can possibly come up with, but in how they work with and adapt their ideas to become part of their lived experience. Daily practice is about being active consumers of their own ideas and making continual connections between what they experience and how they choose to move forward.

Perhaps the students are tentative about putting themselves “out there” for others to see. Their imagination could be limited because they are lacking the mental discipline of encountering the unfamiliar. Dewey (1915) reminds us in *The School and Society* that “imagination is the medium in which the child lives” (p. 38). Perhaps, however, my students lost this capacity in becoming adults? At what point is a child not a child anymore and does Dewey hold fast to the necessity of imagination as we grow into adults? I assert that Dewey not only believes in the capacity of all of us to live and experience imaginatively, but that with daily practice, we can become better at it as adults. Dewey (1899-1924) wrote further about this referencing educators, specifically:

It is difficult always to be a creative artist. I think, however, that we should get on more rapidly if we realized that, if education is going to live up to its profession, it must be seen as a work of art which requires the same qualities of personal enthusiasm and imagination as are required by the musician, painter or artist. Each of these artists needs a technique which is more or less mechanical, but in the degree to which he loses his personal vision to become subordinate to the more formal rules of the technique he falls below the level and grade of the artist. He becomes reduced again to the level of the artisan who follows the blue prints, drawings, and plans that are made by other people. (p. 186)

This statement is pivotal in understanding the breadth in how Dewey considered the place of the arts and how education and the arts are forever happily intertwined. He reminds us that not only is this possible, but also the creative use of imagination in teaching is necessary. Dewey places the work of teachers at the same level of a fine painter, carefully rendering a complex vision. These adult, preservice students are

about to descend upon the local school district for jobs. I wonder what I can do to remind them that they must work to connect their future students through imagination and by practicing it themselves. It is the flexibility of life and nature that can give the classroom lived possibilities and make use of all types of experiences.

As I look out into the class I hesitate, wanting to alleviate their fears, but I also realize that it is in this very struggle that they need to engage in order to become better learners, teachers, and artists. They need to face themselves and consider what they have inside them to give to their search through this course. They need to practice developing a personal style and come to individual discoveries. Dewey (1904) asserts that it is the responsibility of the teacher to be aware of her students' internal attention and the play of their mental powers which give insight into their soul. This internal attention is "the giving of the mind without reserve or qualification" (pp. 13-14). As a teacher, I become more aware of their internal attention and the play of their mental powers through encouraging daily practice. When students engage with themselves as much as with the class, they are telling their stories, and their sketchbooks become the platforms to do that. And that platform requires time. Dewey (1934) states, "The act of expression that constitutes a work of art is a construction in time, not an instantaneous emission" (p. 65). Some might not consider the recording and expression of daily experiences "art"; however, Dewey includes in *Art As Experience* discussion of the arts of living and the relationships created between individuals, their experiences, and those they experience with. Stengel (2004) is of the same mind when she states, "the very idea of knowledge depends on the presence of relation and vice versa," finding that learning, learners, and their environment must all be in relation with one another in order for meaning to be made (p. 151).

The benefits of giving over one's self to daily practice has been examined in various forms by many scholars who seem to all point to an idea of holistic consideration of thought and sense, cognition and emotion, past and present, and a living sense of the learning process (see, for example, Day, 2004; Dewey, 1934; Eisner, 2002; May, 1991; Pateman, 1997; Simpson, Jackson, & Aycock, 2005). My responsibility as a teacher, then, is to cultivate confidence in my students so this constant return to the sketchbook becomes a positive habit in which reflection enables greater knowledge of self and, therefore, growth. As a teacher, I make decisions about which ways to navigate their artistic exposure. I spend hours of careful work weeding through potential materials. I carefully mold and render opportunities for students to see the benefits and the potential within the arts. This role of teacher becomes a multifaceted experience in which I hope to model the living art of teaching and its many complexities (Simpson, Jackson, & Aycock, 2005). And it is this belief that Simpson, Jackson, and Aycock (2005) speak to when they say, "teaching is a complex undertaking that demands the best artists . . . 'what it takes' can be learned: people do" (p. 4-5). That is, growth of skill, intellect, and awareness happens when genuine practice is given toward that end. It is an end which is, by its very nature, meant to

lead to new beginnings (Dewey, 1922). It is the open, rather than closed, nature of daily practice that allows students to consider themselves and the arts more holistically, beyond the walls of the classroom.

“Others won’t like what I have to say”: The Fear of Being Judged

Instruction in the arts of life is something other than conveying information about them. It is a matter of communication and participation in values of life by means of the imagination, and works of art are the most intimate and energetic means of aiding individuals to share in the arts of living.

—Dewey, *Art as Experience*

Not only are there fears about completing daily practice, but also about how that practice (and other work) might be viewed by others. Spolin (1999) expresses the constant strain of needing to feel accepted and not allowing our creativity to see the light of day in saying we “see with others’ eyes and smell with others’ noses” (p. 7). My students are losing themselves in fearing judgment. They have yet to embrace the otherness suggested by Dewey (1934) above. Dewey offers advantage gained when we are engaged by those with whom we experience life. Through sharing our experiences and expressing our selves through art, we are communicating the relational nature of life and the necessity of interaction with others. We must be bold enough to take new experiences and allow them to adjust our own perspectives without losing site of our own values. For as he states, it is the intimate and energetic nature of those relationships that encourages us to grow. According to Dewey (1904), a student’s greatest asset is “his own direct and personal experience” (p. 17). It would seem pertinent, then, that teachers attempt to draw out of students that which is personal and potentially vulnerable to make the content of the course more meaningful. Eisner (2002) is of the same opinion in putting the arts forward as a vehicle for this uncovering of self: “In a sense, work in the arts enables us to stop looking over our shoulder and to direct our attention inward to what we believe or feel. Such a disposition is at the root of the development of individual autonomy” (p. 10). Subsequently, students who have not consciously been in the practice of uncovering their individuality with and through others may encounter fear in doing so. There are elements of uncertainty and unexpectedness in what might result. However, the usefulness of that uncertainty lies in its potential to foster new knowledge and unexpected connections to subject matter, self, and others. The fears I hear reflect a lack of understanding of what English and Stengel (2010) explain here (quoting Dewey [1929] and then responding): “this attitude of fear cannot be abolished by any direct attack. It can be expelled only by power of another positive attitude and emotion, that of going out to and welcoming all incidents of a changing experience,

even those which in themselves are troublesome.’ This suggests a more global goal for educators: the development of the habit of interest, rather than the habit of fear” (p. 535). They go on to say that this goal becomes more complicated as educators attempt to keep students in the discomfort that might lead them to that interest, thereby provoking “the very affect that can become fear.” In other words, it is a slippery slope teachers take in working with (and taking risks addressing) student fears, as it may lead to greater resistance rather than genuine interest.

Being outwardly subjective is one of those risks that I take as a teacher. It is a wonderful breeding ground for uncertainty, although my students may argue with my using the word “wonderful” to describe it. When I am not specific with how many points a drawing is worth, or what exactly I would call a successful piece of artwork, my students tend to get nervous. They want to know what an “A” assignment looks like, including examples and outlines of fulfilled expectations. Because I believe students hold different expectations for themselves and have different needs coming into the class, I cannot give a specific outcome. Doing that would defeat the purpose of having the experience in the first place. As Dewey (1934) discusses, the arts create unique opportunities for communication and allow commonly owned materials to be “reissued” to the public after an artist uses those materials to express her ideas in distinctive ways. We may all begin with the same material, but our outcome isn’t based on identical goals and re-used processes. My responses to students end up being more vague than they would like: “Each of us will come up with different ideas of what might work in our art and in our lesson plans. It is our individual growth that matters.” It becomes my task to communicate to students the benefits of this ambiguous state of affairs. I am still looking for quality work, and I firmly believe in practicing specific artistic skills. However, I want them to focus more on their own growth and how they can learn more about their future students through artistic endeavors and ways of thinking. Dewey (1904) warns against isolating lessons or grades from one another, saying that it is likely detrimental to a student who then begins “snatching at the subject-matter which he is acquiring in order to see if by some hook or crook it may be made immediately available.” Dewey continues: “What is needed is the habit of viewing the entire curriculum as a continuous growth, reflecting the growth of mind itself” (pp. 26-27). It is through the creative process that I believe this growth begins to be visible. One student said at the end of the course, “Art can be a very empowering experience if we let it. This is one of the biggest lessons from the class I will take with me. I have discovered a new way to let the world know who I am” (Student Reflection, 2010). Another student entitled her course reflection paper “Rediscovery” and discussed her new lease on life after spending a semester on a self-directed photography project. She talked about her recent realization of her fading passion and wonder for life and how she was “brought back to life” in her search for good photographs. And in discussing a group performance done for her peers, another student commented, “the main point to remember is that you use what you have, and you do the best that you can

do” (Performance Response, Nov. 7, 2010). These students have grown from a place of fear to acceptance of self and rediscovery. They have engaged what they were uncertain about and enacted courage in moving forward through the arts alongside their classmates. The affect or emotion they had leading into and through these experiences resulted in interest rather than fear (Dewey, 1916).

In *Art As Experience*, Dewey (1934) validates the continual urging of the other: “In ordinary life, much of our pressing forward is impelled by outside necessities, instead of an onward motion like that of waves of the sea. Similarly, much of our resting is recuperation from exhaustion; it too, is compelled by something external” (p. 172). It is through the practice of judging, and through the work of daily practice, that I am hoping to move students from external pushing to internal waves of motivation. I am waiting for them to jump in and embrace the playful nature of their own creativity and interest. An authentic educative experience is one that involves self-discovery and values the communicative opportunities that art creates. Dewey (1934) writes, “Because the objects of art are expressive, they communicate. I do not say that communication to others is the intent of an artist. But it is the consequence of his work—which indeed lives only in communication when it operates in the experience of others” (p. 104). According to this reasoning, the process of communication (and art) is in need of the other. It does not exist or live without the other. So judgments, while sometimes seeming negative up front, may provide the means for communication and engagement with others that are impossible any other way.

“I’m most nervous about getting outside my comfort zone”: The Fear of Performance

A self-conscious person is partly thinking about his problem and partly about what others think of his performances. Diverted energy means loss of power and confusion of ideas.

Confidence is not a name for what one thinks or feels about his attitude; it is not reflex. It denotes the straightforwardness with which one goes at what he has to do. It denotes not *conscious* trust in the efficacy of one’s powers but unconscious faith in the possibilities of the situation.

—Dewey, *Democracy and Education*

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916) explores the nature of method and in doing so discusses various elements of experience. Self-consciousness and confidence are described in terms of directness, intention, power, and possibility: the directness connecting to power and confidence and thus resulting in the ability to identify possibilities within experience. Dewey then describes a self-conscious

person, aptly depicting the fear of performance seen in my classroom. These students lack the directness of confidence and display a lack of power that Dewey says keeps them from considering the possibilities present within experience. Earlier in *Democracy and Education* Dewey discusses the social environment where human beings are always in existence and in consideration of the other: “A being connected with other beings cannot perform his own activities without taking the activities of others into account” (Dewey, 1916, p. 12). Considering both of these avenues of thought, Dewey first calls out the inevitability of performance in view of the other, and then expounds on the quality of the resulting experience based on whether our performer is confident and direct. Most would agree to the inevitability of performing in all facets of life. Practically everything we do as humans requires interaction or engagement with the other, whether that be other humans, the environment, the situation, or so on. How, then, does a teacher work with the fear of performing in her students and encourage the directness necessary? The challenge for educators is to take this everyday experience and encounter it with students, identifying processes within experience and making present the very qualities that creative thought and imagination encourage.

Simpson et al. (2005) expound on Dewey’s ideas here, saying that schools are not necessarily set up to accommodate such experience. Rather than including everyday experiences, schools tend to segment, dissect, and artificially contain the elemental connectedness that outside life enacts. Students may go to science class, but are not led to identify scientific processes present in art class. They may read about the political tensions of centuries past, but they are not allowed to discuss communal happenings from the playground during class time. Students may have intense interests in exploring nature in their backyard or community, but are hushed by the limitations of school subject matter when entering the doors of their school. The flow of a student’s day becomes jerky and disjointed, and this continues through higher education. The students in Arts in the Elementary Curriculum are no exception. They often refrain from playing (with materials, with each other, etc.) because it has been taught out of them. Dewey (1934) states that it is in the fusing of idea and action that play is authentic, and that “imaginative experience exemplifies more fully than any other kind of experience what experience itself is in its very movement and structure” (p. 281). So it is in the act of playing, the act of learning, the act of teaching, that we begin to understand fully the possibilities of experience.

The importance of considering performance and the inherent play in a teacher education program lies heavily with the idea that teachers are performers—there is no getting around that (Lessinger & Gillis, 1976; Phelan, 1993; Timpson & Tobin, 1982). This is not to say that most teachers are “putting on an act” or are anything but genuine and authentic. But it is to say that teaching requires a teaching self that must be developed through understanding one’s self and how one becomes inspired (see, for example, Day, 2004; Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006; Hatfield, Montana, & Deffenbaugh, 2006; Macintyre Latta & Olafson, 2006). Dewey

(1904) comments on this topic in a text devoted to discussing teacher education: “Students should be given to understand that they not only are *permitted* to act upon their own intellectual initiative, but that they are *expected* to do so, and that their ability to take hold of situations for themselves would be a more important factor in judging them than their following any particular set method or scheme” (p. 27). It might then be said that the pedagogical usefulness of students’ fears of being judged and performing for others lies in their summoning of courage and their confidence in actively attending to the situation. As instructors, Dewey wants us to expect students to take hold of their surroundings and respond in ways that reflect an understanding of thoughtful process rather than simple means-to-ends relationships. Dewey (1916) saw the value inherent in “fruitful contact with everyday experiences” and how communication therein is a primary tool in building community, and thus a democratic, educative experience (p. 221). “The communication which insures participation in a common understanding is one which secures similar emotional and intellectual dispositions—like ways of responding to expectations and requirements” (Dewey, 1916, p. 4). It is the connection between performing and communicating that builds the rationale for considering the cultivation of student dispositions prepared to encounter the fear of performing within that community. Perhaps this opens up opportunity for a diversity of response in which students’ individuality is further uncovered. The arts lend themselves to this diversity, and this course may be a unique experience where students may attend to their situations in previously undiscovered ways.

Origin: Naming My Own Fears

As a graduate assistant doing mainly research, I was hesitant to accept the teaching assignment of Arts in the Elementary Curriculum. Without having spent extended time in an elementary school, I questioned how I was going to teach a group of generalist, elementary preservice teachers and gain their trust in order for them to get something from the course. I wondered how I could be convincing as an undergraduate instructor when I was still trying to figure out teaching myself. I reflected on how difficult and chaotic the life of an elementary teacher can be, and considered how I could present the arts as a necessary and possible curricular expectation.

After taking these personal fears to various family members, my advisor, and colleagues at the university (and, really, anyone who would humor me by listening and conversing about these persistent questions), I was reminded that I was able to bring a unique set of experiences to the course. After all, I was also a student and could identify with these types of concerns. I was closer to my undergraduate experience than my colleagues who taught the same class. I had taught professionally in different settings, and in several states. I had studied abroad when I was an undergraduate. I had been involved in education in capacities beyond the roles of student and teacher, such as volunteering, being a guest artist, and being a church choir director. As a fifth-generation teacher in my family, I had been in many school

settings and around “school talk” all my life. And, most importantly, I had an incredible passion for what I was going to be teaching, and if nothing else could, that would drive the course forward. As for still trying to figure out teaching myself—I could use that as an advantage and let my questions initiate conversations in the classroom. We would all be venturing forward together, trying to understand this interesting place that teachers hold in our society. Also, since I had been in school longer than they had, I had come upon many resources that I could help them discover and engage. Dewey (1910) explains a relevant notion of immaturity such that it may be our juvenile sense of wonder that leads us into new experiences and helps us remain open to unfamiliar ideas. He warns against adult thinking being a burden on the young—a thinking that might triumph drawing realistically over a more uncertain, abstract journey to expression. The inexperience I was bringing to my classroom could perhaps be as important as the experience. This idea seems to be in harmony with the idea that fears can be beneficial to learning.

Finding Potential in Fear

Dewey (1934) believes play to be something that begins naturally in childhood and nurtures the formation of identity. Dewey says that if the experience of play was never confronted with resistance, no artwork would ever be created. The following passage outlines the close relationship between resistance and play: “the self is created in the creation of objects, a creation that demands active adaptation to external materials, including a modification of the self so as to utilize and thereby overcome external necessities by incorporating them in an individual vision and expression” (Dewey, 1934, p. 282). It is in this explanation of resistance that I find the role of fear rich with potential. I have always encouraged students to play in my class (with materials, with me, with each other, with content, etc.) but I am now finding myself contemplating all that play and fear entail. Dewey asserts that resistance is necessary for play to move learners forward in thinking and creating. Perhaps there is more to consider when it comes to creating. What conditions are necessary for students to feel free enough to play and take risks, even when they are faced with uncertainty and fear?

Dewey (1910) reminds us that “every vital activity of any depth and range inevitably meets obstacles in the course of its effort to realize itself” (p. 64). This statement reveals the importance of resistance. Other writers comment on the need for some degree of struggle as a necessary component of authentic learning (Day, 2004; Gradle, 2007; Greene, 1995; Macintyre Latta, 2005), while English and Stengel (2010) aptly bring forward “naming fears” as having potential for greater resistance. Here, I suggest that it might be in the process of naming fears that we can become more adept in realizing possibilities. It is worth considering, however, what role the name “fear” plays in how our students (and instructors) identify their emotions and perspectives on learning. Akin to how Dewey (1934) avoids dualities like embracing uncertainty and maintaining confidence, as well as seeing unity in

mind and body, the exploration of fear in conjunction with moving forward finds its place. The pedagogical usefulness of fear is taken up.

My search is akin to that of *A/r/tography* (artist/researcher/teacher–ography), fluctuating between the desire to know, to do, and to create—constantly finding connections and adaptability within those identities (Irwin, 2004). Being an artist-researcher-teacher enables me to live within multiple spaces, considering multiple perspectives at the intersections of thought and action. There is fluidity in considering my work through the lens of *a/r/tography*, as it helps define the complex nature of being someone interested in examining the world intellectually, sensually, and actively. I understand these ways of knowing to be simultaneous and not mutually exclusive. To understand something as a teacher is to consider it as an artist and a perpetual student of life. It is a “shuffling” of identities (Pente, 2004). One element of self does not turn off while another turns on. They are interwoven pieces of self that have blurred edges and can be fragmented, yet are sewn together with a rich history of self and hope for the future (Springgay, 2004). It is in those borderlands, or seams, that I join these *a/r/tographers* considering otherness as means for growth and renewal. As teachers, researchers, and artists, we look to the relations across these identities and among relations with other teachers, researchers, and artists to bring together and flesh out new ideas and meanings. Drawing on the fragments we each weave, life is negotiated and meanings are made.

This negotiation of perceptions as artist, researcher, and teacher has also led me to the scholarly work done in self-study within teacher education. Fitzgerald, Farstad, and Deemer (2002) discuss self-study and amply validate my own search in saying: “We work to improve teacher education in order, ultimately, to improve the education our graduates will provide . . . We try to practice what we preach, to serve as models of reflective practice and lifelong learning. We recognize that in order to help classroom teachers change their practice, we have to start by changing our own practices in teacher education” (p. 220). This manifesto clearly spells out my intentions in embarking on a study of my classroom and the life within it. The emphasis placed on reflection as a lifelong process calls forth the same concentration and desire that *a/r/tography* places on the research of self and other. We learn about ourselves in relation to others. We, as teachers and researchers (and artists), attempt to access modes of thinking and action in order to better understand how learning works for us, as well as our students, and how we may make it a more meaningful and purposeful endeavor (see also Loughran, 2002).

The discourse I use and encourage my preservice elementary teachers to embrace is thus grounded in a living process that involves understanding art as more than a content area. In a speech given to school teachers in 1906, Dewey began to pave the way for this type of concern: “To feel the meaning of what one is doing, and to rejoice in the meaning: to unite in one concurrent fact the unfolding of the inner life and the ordered development of material conditions—that is art” (p. 292). Art is more than a subject; it is more than a class. The arts enact a way of living and thinking through how we approach our everyday lives, experiences, and discourses

(see also Eisner, 2002). I know that as an instructor it is my responsibility to make pedagogical use of the fears brought into my classroom through the artistic thinking to which I hold firm. Helping students make the connection between subject matter and their own embodied experience of learning becomes a goal and a necessary element in understanding how the arts function within education. I believe in what I teach about the arts, and I know it offers potential to those willing to practice the habits of mind inherent in the creative process (Dewey, 1934; Eisner, 2002).

Dewey's (1910, 1934) thinking provides a starting place in considering the beginnings of these preservice students' fears and how initial experiences still shape and speak to the experience students have in my class and, subsequently, other methods classes. In *How We Think*, Dewey refers to the difficulty in separating, or perhaps simply understanding, what has been learned from what could be: "when they are grown up, reflecting upon their opinions and finding those of this sort to be as ancient in their minds as their very memories . . . they are apt to reverence them as sacred things, and not to suffer them to be profaned, touched, or questioned" (as cited in Dewey, 1910). These words speak directly to the inevitable need to address students holistically. When students arrive at school, they bring with them certain assumptions about themselves and what they are capable of. I have students who are convinced that they cannot draw and are absolutely not creative, and they spend much energy in convincing me so. Through speaking with students and hearing their stories, I find that these students' assumptions come from many places and previous experiences that have become part of their being. They are inextricably linked to how students define themselves. Dewey suggests that these assumptions are so intertwined in our history that we do not question them; we revere them as sacred things. We are what we have experienced. The students who walk into my classroom, more often than not, carry with them a guarded consciousness that constrains deep and uncertain exploration. I suggest that their unending mantra of, "I'm just not that artistic," and, "I'm not an artist or anything, but . . ." can be understood through Dewey's notion that these perceptions come from somewhere; and not just anywhere. They perhaps originate in a place so embedded within their past that uncovering their fears becomes the work of a lifetime. But it is also the work that Dewey asserts should begin in the schools. It will take considerable reflection for students not only to realize that mantras can be changed and fears confronted, but also to move forward from those fears to imaginative and creative thinking. I strive to provide experiences for my students that will encourage that movement of thinking to a more embodied understanding of the arts in education. My goal is not to relieve their fears, but to use these fears to help them better understand themselves and their experiences.

Reconstructing Fear

Questions remain even after teaching additional classes and continually re-forming class experiences: What conditions are necessary for students to feel free enough to

play and take risks, even when they are faced with uncertainty and fear? How can I better communicate that daily practice is about valuing process, not the product? How can I assure students that it is their experiences and what they put into them that lives beyond the classroom? And, finally, how can fear be a medium to incite action and encourage imaginative creation? My students change each semester, and so I must renew my understanding of fear and of student responses to fear. I continually remind myself that although student fears may sound similar, each student is unique in his or her realization and utilization of that fear (English & Stengel, 2010).

I have come to know an Arts in the Elementary Curriculum student's tag-line to be "I'm just not that artistic." I find that nine out of ten students (save the few who feel comfortable labeling themselves as artists and who have most likely taken an art studio course or two beyond high school) repeat that mantra each time before presenting their ideas or work to the class. This last semester I have started to, in a sense, expose this tendency to the students themselves, and I can see them responding to that in different ways. Some continue to use it, but really emphasize it because they feel especially strongly that they are incapable of creative acts. Others I see physically restraining themselves so they don't say it, fearing I might disagree with them out loud. Still others have just found other ways to imply that same message: "I haven't taken art class since elementary school," or, "It didn't turn out well at all but . . ." It seems there is a need to justify themselves over and over to one another. Many of them have been in class together for several years, as they are juniors and seniors in the program. My initial thought was that since they know one another, the fear of judgment would not be as intense. Perhaps I need to do a better job in setting up an environment where students more readily believe that, "the function of criticism is the reeducation of perception" rather than the "end-all" judgment of the artist (Dewey, 1934, p. 328). Maybe since they know one another so well, they are fearful of uncovering new information that might require a redefining of one another. It is possible that negative childhood (or adulthood) experiences having to do with the arts weigh too heavily on their minds. Or, perhaps it is simply the unknown: "I have never tried this, so why would I be interested in it or good at it?"

Through the voices and writings of my preservice students in Arts in the Elementary Curriculum, I came to understand fears of art to involve fears in daily practice requirements for the course, fear of being judged on their artwork, and fear of performing. The purpose of my course then became to explore those fears and make use of them to help foster greater student understanding of the power of the arts in education. I discussed fears with students and began a conversation that revealed openness to individual resistance and promoted continued reflection on now-realized fears. I found that growing awareness and understanding of one's fears can lead to a more complex understanding of what it means to learn and teach with the arts. Representative examples of that growing awareness in students include (pseudonyms used):

Nancy: I had come into this class prepared to defend my lack of creativity, willing to attempt the arts, but sure that I would be unable to produce any sort of work with any artistic worth . . . I have found a new respect for the arts in all their forms, and have found an unknown passion for my own creative expression. . . . There is no excuse for being unable to express yourself creatively; it only takes education and a willingness to explore beyond conventional methods. (student work, Dec. 9, 2009)

Marie: As teachers there is always room for growth just like our students. Teachers have to be willing to explore outside of their own comfort zone in order to so. This I feel is the most important thing that I have learned in Teac 305: to take risks and step out of your box. (student reflection, Dec. 9, 2009)

Audrey: Teachers can learn from art in that it takes practice to become a good artist and it takes practice to become a good teacher. (student reflection, Dec. 9, 2009)

These students' comments reveal the beginning of a transformation in thinking as they conclude a semester course dedicated to artistic thinking and creation and move toward their teaching careers. They are discovering that the creative process they have experienced and the artwork they created "remind us that expressions of genuinely felt meaningfulness are possible" and that their response can become part of a living expression of self and world (Eldridge, 2010, p. 254). Both Dewey (1934), and Eldridge (2010) beautifully expose the potential of the artistic, aesthetic experience as an adaptive, interactional, meaningful, and imaginative journey necessary for growth.

Of course, not all students come away with such renewal. Mark had difficulty throughout the semester understanding the arts beyond an extracurricular identification:

I still have a strong belief that students need to have the core education to move on in school. If a student is outstanding at a particular thing like art or music then I would hope they get the chance to be a part of that thing they are good at. Then again not very many people stick with that thing they like to do or are really good at for the rest of their lives so they need to fall back on their education. (student reflection, Dec. 9, 2009)

Mark's comments are reminiscent of many students who choose not to see beyond stereotypical definitions of the arts even after a semester in my classroom. He was convinced that there was an important hierarchy to disciplines like math, reading, art, and so on and that the arts were at the bottom of the pile. Rather than having contempt for my class, Mark worked to try and understand what the arts provided that other areas did not. A semester was not enough for him in this exploration. And if Dewey (1934) is correct in writing that, "The act of expression that constitutes a work of art is a construction in time, not an instantaneous emission," I can hardly fault a student for not perfectly aligning with my course timeline (p. 65). Just

as our fears are unique, so are our creative journeys. My hope is that my students, especially ones like Mark, continue after my class to consider the complexity and the potential the arts provide. I encourage several things during the course to help make that happen. Rather than outlining a checklist of specifications for an “A” grade, I work to engage them in conversation and discussions of personal rationales for teaching. Instead of pushing students from my external position as instructor, I seek to incite movement from within, helping students stir their own passions and let that drive them forward. I also find it important and transformative to continually invite students to present themselves, their work, their ideas about education, and their responses to class experiences. I continue to see discomfort, concern, and anxiety on the faces and in the action (or inaction) of students as we encounter new experiences in the classroom. And each semester I remind myself that this is part of the process; part of the experience of encountering the unknown and making it meaningful. Fear will make them wake up and attend not only to the new content or process, but to their own response to that experience as well. The students and I have to expect and accept a certain level of discomfort, because it is that struggle that moves us forward in considering the arts and their importance for education.

The fear of art and its complexities that students bring to my classroom are not simple problems that can be solved. The students’ journeys (and my own) through the course open up new possibilities that may not have existed before. The potential in uncertainty is far greater and more enlivening than any plan we could have set for ourselves. Maxine Greene (1995) speaks to how education should be open to the individuals that are a part of it: “As we ponder educational purposes, we might take into account the possibility that the main point of education (in the context of a lived life) is to enable a human being to become increasingly mindful with regard to his or her lived situation—and its untapped possibilities” (p. 183). Greene’s comments reflect a growing need to see education, our selves, and, I would add, the arts anew. Greene gives credit to the arts’ unique qualities that allow for making such an educational experience possible. If teacher educators, and by extension all educators, can be more aware of the languages and symbol systems they make available, and what they may not be making available, students will have greater opportunity to consider how they name themselves and their world. I want my students to be able to consider the languages of the arts and how they exemplify a widening notion of knowledge and what it means to learn and teach with creative possibilities.

I am beginning to see the art in fear, in the attentiveness it calls forth and the participation required of both my students and myself as we seek not only to identify our fears, but also to work together to better express our creative journeys. The art in fear can be found in the focus student fears have put on the act of creating and the intensity that process entails. It is an expressive act in time that requires play between resistance and triumph, calling on the creative being to hold fast to uncertainty, knowing and feeling that it is in that complex state that there is potential for learning (Dewey, 1934). Dewey (1910) states, “Experience is not a rigid and

closed thing; it is vital, and hence growing . . . experience also includes the reflection that sets us free from the limiting influence of sense, appetite, and tradition” (p. 156). My students and I are experiencing a growing awareness of the space in which our learning takes place and an appreciation for the fears we all bring to the classroom. The journey continues.

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